

Commands push for airmen to get CCAF degrees

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Posted : Monday Jan 31, 2011 5:45:30 EST

If you want to make senior master sergeant, you have to have a Community College of the Air Force degree.

No degree, no senior rater endorsement, no promotion. It's just that simple. And not enough of you up-and-comers have graduated from CCAF.

That's all about to change.

Air Force Materiel Command and Air Combat Command are driving their noncommissioned officers to get a CCAF degree — and other major commands could adopt the initiative if it works.

Materiel Command has declared 2011 to be "Year of the Community College of the Air Force," according to Chief Master Sgt. Eric Jaren, AFMC's top enlisted leader.

Today, about 3,200 of its 13,424 enlisted airmen — roughly 24 percent — are CCAF alums. By the end of December, the command wants to add 1,350 or so more airmen to the ranks of the college educated; the 4,550 airmen would represent a third of the command's enlisted members. The goal by 2015 is 50 percent, or about 6,700 airmen.

"I'd like to see it as high as we can go," Jaren said in a telephone interview from his office at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

Jaren made the same push two years ago when he served as a wing command chief at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif. Edwards managed to increase the percentage of its CCAF graduates from almost 26 percent to 31 percent.

Now, Jaren is sending out his message about CCAF several times a week to interested base-level command chiefs and encourages AFMC units who share bases with other major commands to spread the word.

Like AFMC, ACC kicked off its "Ignite ACC" program with the new year. The program, though, doesn't have graduation goals and targets technical sergeants and master sergeants, according to Alice Jessup, command education director.

Right now, more than 11,500 of ACC's 57,833 enlisted airmen — about a fifth — have a CCAF degree.

A CCAF degree will benefit even those airmen who expect to retire at lower ranks or leave the service earlier, she said.

"They are going to need that education in their next career," Jessup said in a telephone interview from her office at Langley Air Force Base, Va.

A good career move

Of the 264,000 or so active-duty airmen servicewide, about 59,400 — 22.5 percent — graduated from CCAF, most earning the degree after about a decade in uniform, Air Force data shows.

A change made in 2006 to the rules governing selection to senior and chief master sergeant is one reason for the full-court press by AFMC and ACC.

Those of you competing for senior or chief stripes are eligible for endorsement by your senior rater — typically your wing commander — only if you have a CCAF degree. Without an endorsement, your chances of making E-8 or E-9 are slim to none.

Another reason to hit the books is to show supervisors in charge of assignments that you know your job.

“This is an Air Force institution and basically certifies that you are proficient in your career field,” Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force James Roy told Air Force Times in an e-mail.

“It certainly makes one more competitive,” added Roy, who has two CCAF degrees.

If you’re competing for promotion to E-4 to E-7, you don’t get additional points in a separate category for having a CCAF degree. Education is only one of the factors figured into your annual enlisted performance report. Earn a degree and your rater probably will give you a 5 for exceeding training requirements.

When asked if the Air Force would ever award promotion points for a degree, Roy didn’t mince words.

“No,” he wrote.

How CCAF works

You start earning credit toward a CCAF degree when you begin your technical skills training, Lt. Col. Timothy Albrecht, the commandant of CCAF, told Air Force Times from CCAF headquarters at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.

Your major is based on your Air Force Specialty Code. Aircraft maintainers study aviation maintenance technology. Security forces members work toward a degree in criminal justice. The Air Force won’t award a degree in art history.

You need 64 credits to graduate, earning all but 15 credits by doing your job well. For example, you get credit for completing the career development course required for your five-level skill qualification and graduating from Airman Leadership School.

The 15 credits CCAF does not offer are for courses without specific military purposes. They are taught at most civilian colleges — humanities, social science, writing, speech and math. The Air Force reimburses you for tuition and books, but you have to take classes on your own time.

Many of you don’t get that CCAF degree because you never earn those 15 credits. There are just too many other things going on, like work and family.

“They have conflicting interests vying for their time,” said Chief Master Sgt. Kevin Vegas, command chief for AFMC’s 72nd Air Base Wing at Tinker Air Force Base, Okla.

Study buddies

Both ACC and AFMC are focusing on the credits that you can’t earn through CCAF.

Materiel Command uses mentors to encourage you to make the commitment.

A senior NCO at each base serves as the “secretary of education,” the point man for the initiative, Jaren said. With the help of other base NCOs, the secretary recruits other CCAF graduates to become mentors. Your mentor should be the same rank as you so you don’t think you’re under orders to get a degree.

“It is not about arm twisting,” Jaren said.

The NCO team also will work with base education offices to make sure courses for the 15 credits are taught on base when airmen can attend, Jaren said.

And the NCOs are publicizing that airmen can earn some of the 15 credits by taking the College Level Examination Program tests. The standardized CLEP tests offered by the College Board let students earn college credit based on

what they already know.

Tinker is holding a “CLEP-a-thon” this spring, when airmen will be encouraged take the tests, Vegas said.

Ignite ACC is less ambitious, relying on base education offices to remind airmen of options they might not have considered — such as earning the 15 credits through online courses, Jessup said.

Jaren believes the value that the Air Force puts on education will grow. The next initiative, he said, is encouraging CCAF grads to pursue a bachelor’s degree. He earned a bachelor’s in management in 2008, a decade after he received his CCAF degree.

“CCAF is not the end,” Jaren said. “It’s the beginning.”

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